

**Testimony of Michael Lengle, Assistant Executive Director
West Haven Community House
For the Connecticut General Assembly, Appropriations Committee**

Restore full funding for the State After School grant program

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

I write to urge you to restore full funding for the State After School grant program funded by the Connecticut Department of Education. In addition, to providing quality, constructive out-of-school-time activities to 7,000 children and youth from 32 cities and towns throughout our state, the program is helping the state achieve its educational goals, reducing demand for other more costly state services, establishing a foundation for higher quality after-school programming, and building a base of state-specific research that will help us make even wiser investments going forward.

When the Connecticut General Assembly decided to significantly expand state funding for after school programs to \$5.5 million annually in its last biennial budget, it was most certainly motivated by an overwhelming body of research and evaluation studies, as well as large-scale, rigorously conducted syntheses looking across many research and evaluation studies, confirming that participants in after school programs benefit in a variety of interrelated outcome areas – academic, social/emotional, prevention, and health and wellness.

Academic outcomes associated with participation in after school programs include: Better attitudes toward school and higher educational aspirations, higher school attendance rates and less tardiness, less disciplinary action, lower dropout rates, better performance in school, as measured by achievement test scores and grades, greater on-time promotion, improved homework completion, and engagement in learning.

Social/emotional outcomes associated with participation in after school programs include: decreased behavioral problems, improved social and communication skills and/or relationships with others, increased self-confidence self-esteem and self-efficacy, lower levels of depression and anxiety, development of initiative, and improved feelings and attitudes toward self and school.

Given that Carrigan Middle School is a Title I school that has failed to achieve Annual Yearly Progress for three consecutive years, that only 16 % of 8th grade students take high level math courses compared to 30% statewide, that only 9% of Carrigan students pass the Presidential Fitness Test compared to 36% statewide, and that our city has the 13th worst teen birth rate in the state, I am very concerned about the negative impact the proposed reduction in State After School funding will have on our youth, our families, our school system, and our community.

Having had the opportunity to witness first hand some of the other SDE-supported after-school programs in the state, I am also concerned about the impact on 6,000 children and youth, and 32 cities and towns.

I am fully cognizant of the difficult financial situation in which our state finds itself. However, it simply doesn't make financial sense to eliminate quality programming that forwards our state's goals for educational achievement and educational equity, and results in considerable costs savings across several sectors of state service. In addition, it makes equally little sense to have spent two years building infrastructure in local programs and at the state level, only to eliminate it. Programs have built closer relationships with school personnel to connect the learning that takes place during the traditional school day with that which occurs during the after-school day. Youth Workers have been trained to align their activities with state academic standards and blueprints, and Teachers have been trained how to enhance learning through hands on, experiential activities. Program staff and school personnel have built systems and gained technology skills to collect, input and analyze information on student demographics, student achievement, and student attendance. Evaluators have begun analyzing the data on our state's After School participants to measure the impact of after school programming in our state, learn valuable lessons that can inform our educational community, and gain knowledge that can be applied to future grant programs. It would be shameful to have to rebuild this infrastructure a few years from now when the state funding environment is seen as more favorable, and it would be foolish to not have sustained the initial expansion for long enough to conduct meaningful research.

I know the Carrigan After School program is very important to the youth and families in West Haven, and to the school administrators in teachers at Carrigan Middle School. That doesn't mean necessarily that you will receive as many calls or letters from them about this issue as you will from other groups. Many of the families that we serve work several jobs, don't have English as a primary language, are disenfranchised politically, or are struggling simply to care for their children and manage their household and work responsibilities. That said, I do know that you will hear from some of them, and I ask you to listen intently to what they say, and know that they speak for many more like them. I also call to your attention a National Election Night

Prevention outcomes include: avoidance of drug and alcohol use, decreases in delinquency and violent behavior, increased knowledge of safe sex, avoidance of sexual activity, and reduction in juvenile crime.

Health and wellness outcomes include: better food choices, increased physical activity, increased knowledge of nutrition and health practices, reduction in Body Mass Index, improved blood pressure, and improved body image.

Considering the challenges our state faces in reducing its educational achievement gap, and the vast sums of money it spends on juvenile justice, incarceration, teen pregnancy, grade repetition, public assistance, and the other societal costs of school failure and youth disengagement, the modest investment must have seemed as a prudent expenditure. A ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, as Benjamin Franklin so wisely penned!

Utilizing the \$5.5 million dollars annually in State After School grant funding, 44 grantees throughout Connecticut have implemented or enhanced 74 after school programs serving 7,000 children and youth in 32 cities and towns. The programs are in big cities and small towns, urban areas and rural ones. They serve children and youth of all ages, races and economic conditions. However diverse their own community or population of participants, each of the programs is focused on the same goals set forth by the Connecticut General Assembly: increasing CMT scores, increasing school attendance, and reducing suspensions and expulsions.

West Haven is one of the communities awarded State After School grant funding through a rigorous competition in which only half of those who applied received funding. In close cooperation with the West Haven School District, the West Haven Community House engages 90 youth weekly in after-school programming at Carrigan Middle School. The participants receive academic support and tutoring from certified teachers in their school. They gain exposure to and build skills in positive “theme activities” like cooking, woodworking, magic, software application, and martial arts that enhance academic learning and shape character. They interact with local high school and college sport and activity groups to expand their horizons about what they can get involved with at the next level of education. And they participate in “Life Skills” education activities that promote self-efficacy, positive decision-making, healthy choices, refusal skills and increased communication with parents. Prior to the start of this program, there were no regular after-school activities at Carrigan Middle School – other than clubs that meet occasionally for 40 minutes after school once or twice monthly.

Poll conducted this November that found that 76% of all voters said that newly elected officials in Congress, as well as new state and local leaders, should increase funding for after school programs!

In conclusion, I ask you to once again to consider the preponderance of research demonstrating the value of after school programs, weigh the modest costs of engaging youth in after school services versus the much larger costs of school failure and youth disengagement, and evaluate the wisdom of not following through on the state's initial investment.

Sincerely,

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